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ABSTRACT

Outmigration in the rural Upper Midwest prompted a group of citizens and University of South Dakota faculty to form the Center for the Advancement of Rural Communities (ARC). ARC considers how to stimulate traditionally competitive and isolated South Dakota peoples to collaborate for economic, social, educational, political, and cultural gains. As linkages with other like-minded rural groups were made and as members become informed about the importance of Internet resources in marketing new ideas and business ventures, ARC began developing a virtual rural community. ARC works with a distance education project that is bringing high bandwidth interactive video to 12 rural communities in the region, and with a national organization that explores the interests of national and international rural groups that desire to collaborate in maintaining their lifestyle, particularly as an alternative to urban models. Rural economic development requires rural citizens to envision a larger community. This requirement conflicts with traditional values of self-sufficiency and independence. Using telecommunications technologies to link widely distributed, small groups of fiercely independent people takes significant planning and energy. ARC has learned that, at least for the current generation of rural adults, face-to-face communication must precede use of Web/technological resources; technology applications must reflect intentions and values of rural people; and facilitators need warmth, interest, exceptional listening skills, and accurate recording skills to build communication linkages. (TD)

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# Paper Presentations
# Virtual Rural Community Development: Human Links That Sustain Web Links

*Larry K. Bright, Wayne H. Evans, & Kathy Marmet, USA*

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# Paper Presentations
# Virtual Rural Community Development: Human Links That Sustain Web Links

*Larry K. Bright, Wayne H. Evans, & Kathy Marmet, USA*

**Abstract**

Information technologies hold promise as tools for rural leaders to sustain the rural way of life as an option to the urban alternative. World wide communications and information availability pose a significant challenge for rural citizens accustomed to human contact as essential in building communication, trust, and new visions. Efforts to build actual or virtual rural communities with increased vitality and vision, let alone economic or political clout, need to accommodate this fierce reliance on self-sufficiency and independence. These values may in themselves be part of the lure of the country for many of the urban and rural high talent people who want to maintain their individuality and yet share in the development of benefits of global interdependence.

Traditions of self-sufficiency and independence have long characterized the rural populations of the Midwest, including tribal societies. These values have often limited collaboration and accommodation of change. The outmigration in the Upper Midwest (the Dakotas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota in this context) deeply concerned a group of citizens and University of South Dakota faculty in the 1990's. A mix of professors, farmers, lawyers, educators, scientists, and business people came together to consider how to stimulate traditionally competitive and isolated South Dakota peoples to collaborate for economic, social, educational, political, and cultural gains.

## A Center for the Advancement of Rural Communities (ARC)

This group became known as the Center for the Advancement of Rural Communities (ARC) with physical location in Vermillion, South Dakota, but a virtual reality across the nation. The group is composed of members who either currently live in this rural part of the Midwest on the borders of South Dakota, Iowa, and Nebraska, or who have roots in the farms, small towns, or reservations of the region. Some members live in Maryland and Virginia, but they all share a strong concern for rural social and economic development. Primary premises of ARC include the importance of the rural or country living alternative, the value of conversation and sharing, the importance of education and training in rural development, the significance of protecting the rural environment, and a strong desire to see interdependence at work in the Midwest among the people, the professions, and the smaller communities.

The primary agenda of ARC during the past three years has been to explore the uses of information technologies in the further development of actual and virtual communities in the region. Some of the ARC experience links to that of the education and business faculties at the University of South Dakota in which college faculty have linked with small communities to initiate projects to encourage professional people to work together for improving their educational and economic futures.

Other links have been through business and industrial organization members who have interests in creating business and research parks. Additionally, there have been interests in establishing tourism and recreation centers, particularly related to tribal and rural cultures. Some of the members of ARC have had organizational development education and consulting experience, and the organization expects to grow.

Over the past three years, ARC has relearned many times that for rural citizens, a technology connection must follow live interaction and trust development. ARC members set out to build live and virtual resources for linking people in South Dakota, the Midwest, and beyond. Links have been made to date in Alabama, Thailand, and Brazil. The goal has been to bring rural advocates together to share concerns and successes, to build political coalitions, and to take charge of the future for the rural alternative for living.

## Actual and Virtual Rural Community Development

ARC members have become informed about the importance of Internet resources in marketing new ideas and business ventures. As linkages with other like-minded rural groups have been made, the concept of developing a virtual rural community has become a primary focus for ARC. The need for a WWWeb resource on successful rural development projects has been part of ARC discussions. Some ARC members were supported by the Office of Research at the University of South Dakota to present this concept at the 1999 national conference of Partners in Virginia.

The ARC volunteer group began with the hope that their effort might bring to the Southeastern part of the state a "gateway" recreation or tourism center to the prairie in real and virtual terms. The ARC group came together to explore concepts for social changes which might benefit the people in their rural areas. This group has worked to explore the realities about why rural people are suspicious, if not hostile, about the "intrusion" of technology and "outsiders" on their lives. The group established itself as a kind of think tank for confronting rural citizen values.

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The ARC Center members choose to support the concept of rural or smaller group living. By choice people commit to the importance of relationships, family, closeness, and the value of life on the land. Some of the ARC members share a Native heritage and small town or farm background. They have deep commitments to living in small family groups. Rural people with these roots have some guarded suspicions of urban life and expanding technology.

As individuals shared details of their lives in face-to-face meetings, then phone conferences took on new meaning. Then, email became much more frequent and meaningful. The writers suggests that at least for the current generation of rural community adults, face-to-face communication must precede use of Web/technological resources for further expanding community to accrue the benefits in economic, social, political, or educational terms.

**A Regional Telecommunications Project**

Some of the ARC members became directly involved in an education project, which linked 12 rural communities in the region to bring high bandwidth interactive video distance learning options for students and community members. The project became known as Southeast Interactive Long Distance Learning Project (Southeastern South Dakota). It required the merging of the interests of small communities--a real test of leadership in rural community expansion. Technology was a primary means for bringing people together.

The University of South Dakota School of Education and a regional vocational school in Sioux Falls participated as members in this project. Two years of dialogue were necessary for establishing the base of trust, common schedules, programming, and mutual benefit options for the twelve communities to become a functional distance learning program.

Experience with this project, still ongoing, gave ARC members increased enthusiasm that citizens and professionals can take advantage of technology resources to improve school curriculum offerings and to build new concepts of regionalism. Clearly, the strategic planning to initiate this project in an environment in which State political conservatives were continuing to attempt to find the least expensive means for supporting distance learning required considerable face-to-face communication. When Southeast Interactive Long Distance Learning Project development process began in early 1996, most of the participating school districts were not using the Internet or email.

In February of 2000, however, email and the project Web site are central to project administration (http://www.usd.edu/sildl). Completion of the linkages among participating communities, both electronic and personal, is testimony to how collaboration among competitive communities can be achieved.

McMahon and Salant have indicated that rural strategic planning is essential for rural communities to make use of information technologies. Unfortunately, the high-speed broadband infrastructure necessary to realize these opportunities (electronic commerce, distance learning, and telemedicine) often bypasses rural areas, which may lack the market to attract such investment or may fail to capitalize on local resources. Consequently, rural communities must develop a plan that identifies strategies with the most potential for taking advantage of telecommunications (McMahon and Salant, 1999).

Regional telecommunication development, as well as most any rural economic development, requires rural citizens to envision a larger community. This requirement comes into conflict with traditional values of self-sufficiency and independence. In the Southeastern South Dakota Regional Telecommunications project it took a lot of skillful and respectful talking to get fans of one of the local school football team to embrace the next small town's promoters as loyal members of the same community.

**Finding National Friends for Partnering**

ARC has remained committed to the belief that Web/technological communications can be of important benefit to linking rural communities with common goals. ARC has worked with a national organization (National Association of PARTNERS IN EDUCATION) (hereafter called PARTNERS) to explore the interests of national and international rural groups that desire to collaborate as a community in designing programs and projects to maintain their style of living, particularly as an alternative to urban models (Asche et al., 1997).

The ARC group were advocates that electronic communications, particularly with full motion video capabilities, to connect rural neighbors locally, regional, or in the world be "brought into the family" for economic, social, and educational benefits. The ARC group set about in 1998 to try this perspective out. This paper reports initial experiences in promoting the concept with rural people.

**Challenges for Change for Advancing Rural Communities**

Among ruggedly independent people in rural settings, such as in South Dakota, the concept of community-linking is abstract and fragile. A person needs significant trust and many handshakes to establish new relationships that might be called friendships. So, what applications may be made of Internet resources to join communities into more

cohesive and competitive blocks? How can technology be of use in building collaboration for achieving economic, educational, or social goals?

What can citizens do to harness Web/technological resources to expand and sustain relationships and projects? What does it take to empower people who have been struggling independently to survive in a global economy to become a broader, more economically viable virtual rural community? What has been the experience of a citizen and university group in South Dakota in making the human links that are essential for initiating electronic links?

In sparsely populated regions of the central and western United States, it is common for towns to be smaller than a thousand people and for rural homes to be more than ten miles apart. While the advent of more rapid travel and technologies for communication have made wide expanses of land less ominous for human development, reliance on trust and experience remain as the foundation of the concept of community.

Rural people are difficult to group together. Despite the homogenizing influence of television and other electronic media in producing a nearly uniform suburban culture across the nation, small communities in sparsely populated areas have retained distinct cultural traditions and identities. These have been based on the cultural inheritance of their residents and the unique challenges and opportunities of the land which has provided their sustenance.

These are not cultures frozen in time. Lakota people live in frame houses, not tipis. Yet each small cluster of homes is a community with its own sense of identity. The Lakota language and culture continue to grow and adapt. Old country languages are no longer spoken on the streets of small towns settled by Danes, Norwegians or Irish, yet the patterns of relating retain a distinctive flavor in the respective communities. Remnants of old wounds, resentments and suspicions of outsiders remain as obstacles to cooperation.

Yes, there are the poor, the rich, the informed, the less informed, culturally same, culturally different, the well-traveled, and the isolated. Many communities in South Dakota have yet very active memories about the tyranny between Native Americans and encroaching settlers, between Scandinavians and Germans over the same land and community governance, among fundamentalist religious groups and the irreligious, and among political parties with many exaggerated promises for recovering or advancing rural economies.

The population shifts away from agriculture have left the landscape littered with crumbling houses, businesses, and farms that constantly remind citizens of the risks of change. New technology for farming means expensive equipment and discarded fences and larger production units that threaten the existence of the smaller, more intimate, and engaged social units. New visions for rural communities have to pass the scrutiny of rural citizens who know the effects of isolation from urban growth.

There have been examples in recent and past times of communities coming together to build barns, rebuild a burned house, or to save a town from a flood. The sense of neighbors helping each other remains a strong rural value. ARC members realized, however, that something as abstract as using telecommunications technologies to link widely distributed small groups of fiercely independent people would take some significant planning and energy. Why would separate communities that have been independent, indifferent, or competitive desire to help each other? Goals for building broader, more inclusive communities were always first on the agenda in regional exploratory meetings.

**An ARC Manifesto for Community Living**

Consensus of ARC members has been that relationships must always be at the heart of a good community. Things and money are not what necessarily create happiness. It's the relationships and friendships that count. The following dichotomies may reflect the ARC perspective:

**Country Living--the Choice of Some of the Highly Talented**

There is increasing evidence that some of the best educated and most talented members of the global human resource pool desire the country life. The clean air, the neighborhoods, the gardens, the ride on the prairie, and the horse in the back yard are some of the items that have been mentioned by ARC members as counter to the urban problems of pollution, crime, and over-choice. Joel Kotkin, a senior fellow at the Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy, said recently that states that have frequently been considered behind the times, such as Nebraska, are beginning to experience selective rural community growth.

Big companies that depend largely on manufacturing have been heading to the hinterlands for years, seeking low taxes and compliant workers. But now it's the brain-intensive industries, and more importantly the people who start them, who are headed out to the country.

Although technology is the enabling factor, the primary driver may be the increasingly repellent features of the big metropolitan areas themselves. With traffic, smog, and crime invading even oncepristine nerdistans such as Silicon Valley and Orange County, there may be a greater allure for opting for a small-town lifestyle--as long as it's sufficiently wired (Kotkin, 1999).

The Midwest may be a preferred migration stop in the future for additional sophisticated individuals. According to research done by Adamson and Partridge, "the Midwest region has one of the highest probabilities of urban-to-rural migration in the U. S. According to the study sample; but more importantly to small town economies, the study found that workers in this region are less likely to ever leave the rural sector" (North Sioux City Times, 1998).

**The Promise of High Touch with High Tech**

Discussions with rural citizens frequently centered on how high technology linkages may have anything to do with "touching them where they really live." Will values for honesty, love, dignity, and truth really be a part of developing Web/technology communications, or is this communication to remain either totally impersonal, or worse, a marketing medium for "clever big city hucksters" who are just so many more music men selling trombone cases?

New human linkages of vitality and hopefulness are certainly in the rhetoric of digital technology advocates. In promoting, engaged, and interactive "live" environment in rural communities, ARC leaders have experienced that rural people of diverse backgrounds and characteristics will come together to consider their alternative futures and the impact which technology could play, both positively and negatively. The perennial concern in discussions has been whether the Internet, the Web, Microsoft, or "info-tech-babble" will mean anything to the family interested in sustaining relationships which nurture its members. Considerable effort is needed to establish common ground for sustaining valued mature relationships and for developing technology applications to reflect intentions and values of rural people for use in rural community development.

**Projects to Test the Transfer of Handshakes through Technology**

For decades, human resource and organizational development literature has maintained the importance of establishing a process that encourages listening and sharing among members of subgroups if leaders wish to influence norms and mores. This is particularly so with today's "knowledge workers" (Sherman et al., p. 8). This process is no less important in rural community development. To share in the burdens and benefits of society, individuals in organizations and communities need to have opportunities to participate and to grow.

Early in the formulation of ARC, members realized that exploring goals, listening and sharing, taking time together socially and on projects, and following-through after meetings to reinforce each other's contributions and values were all important steps. ARC members have been involved in establishing live relationships with several entities to test the extent that virtual communities may be enhanced with technology follow-through. ARC members have established connections with a national organization focused on Partnerships, Native American communities, a traditionally all Black university, small towns, schools, and a USD-Brazilian linkage all of which will be briefly described.

**A Tribal Community Development Project in Education**

One ARC member has participated for two years in dialogues among Midwestern Tribal Colleges. With a Kellogg Initiative grant under the leadership of Oglala Lakota College in South Dakota, tribal colleges have sought to develop accredited graduate education programs. The need for patient and culturally sensitive communications for a non-tribal University faculty to play a role in offering assistance to tribal initiatives has been impressed upon ARC members. It takes time to build live relationships, and apparently no amount of print, email, or video can replace the need for people-to-people interaction at the start. With a base of trust and exchange, however, there is potential for virtual community to grow.

**A Link to Brazil**

In 1998 the University of South Dakota School of Education was able to employ a new faculty member who was native of Brazil. With her established relationships in Sao Paulo, other faculty members from USD were introduced in person to establish shared goals in teacher education development. After face-to-face contact, telecommunication and email linkages followed into 2000. This experience added to ARC and USD faculty knowledge that linkages across cultures can be established. The importance of shared goals, live interaction, clear intentions, and follow-up communication through email, with pictures, seemed to be the outcome requirements for making this relationship happen.

**Tuskegee and Vermillion**

Linkage was made by USD School of Education faculty to establish relationships and potential for shared telecommunication projects with Tuskegee University, a traditionally all Black institution. As USD has been a traditionally all White institution, the deans of both universities determined that they might collaborate to establish an exchange of faculty and students for increasing diversity on both campuses. After a year of letters and email, it was clear that face-to-face meetings on both campuses were required to establish more than academic contacts. These exchanges were arranged in 1998 and 1999. The result was collaborative grant project development. The experience suggests that virtual

community may be expanded if the appropriate base is developed in live interactions.

**A National Partnering Organization for Facilitation Process**

As ARC searched Web resources for organizations with similar goals to stimulate citizen participation in community development, the Virginia ARC member learned of the National Association for Partners in Education (PARTNERS) through a social acquaintance. After a two-year process of handshaking, goal sharing, listening, speaking, conference presentation, and training, ARC and PARTNERS have formed an on-going link that has been sustained through email and many teleconferences. Tolerance for use of electronic communications has increased rapidly. Most meetings have included at least six of the nine ARC members at once with PARTNERS leaders. The power of simultaneous mutual influence seems to be at work in maintaining the ARC group momentum and in keeping the members motivated to participate without financial reimbursement.

With a training grant from the University of South Dakota Office of Research, three ARC members participated in a PARTNERS training program in 1999 which is designed to prepare leaders to facilitate citizen participation in planning for change in education. The process focuses on engaging people to collaborate in looking to the future and to the past to take stock of the resources available for improving community life. PARTNERS began two decades ago in support of encouraging citizens to volunteer to mentor school children. It evolved to enlisting the support of businesses to adopt schools, as well as continuing its support of linkage of citizens to school children.

The PARTNERS linkage has shown that a small citizen group in South Dakota can find friends in many places, including Alexandria, Virginia, where PARTNERS headquarters are located. This is an organization that most any community would enjoy knowing-people who have as their business the development of relationships in and across communities for the sake of improving the learning and living environment for children and adults. (NAPEhq@NAPEhq.org.)

More recently the PARTNERS agenda broadened to encourage citizens and educators to expand their constituencies to empower many more people to participate in community development in the global society. It was particularly noteworthy to ARC members that PARTNERS in 1999 recognized that most of its training programs and materials were focused on suburban settings. ARC inquiries, handshakes, and face-to-face contacts with PARTNERS led to an ARC contract to suggest modification in PARTNERS materials to make them more useful in rural Midwest communities, including Native American sites.

**Link with the Heart of Native American Communities**

The PARTNERS process for engaging citizens in focused conversations was taken to the White River, South Dakota, community for application in February of 2000. PARTNERS leaders participated by teleconference in the initial White River and ARC meetings in February of 2000, with no apparent discomfort or suppression to the focused conversation. White River is in the heart of a Native American community, with the town bordering the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. ARC members facilitated a dialogue with representatives from White River Schools, a four county rural development organization, and Native American community members. Participants included school board leaders, citizens in rural economic development, technology advocates, White River School's Indian Education Committee and tribal college representatives interested in rural education and economic development.

The process of building rural community; expanding it, and supporting communication with technology takes time and some money for initial travel expenses. ARC members from Maryland, as well as South Dakota, participated in discussions about technology impact on ranch, reservation, and education system functions. Most expenses of ARC linkage initiatives have been born by members as individuals. This is a measure of the strength of bonding among members and their goals. After building relationships, exchanging family stories, taking stock of each other's goals and considering just what the boundaries of "our community" might be emerged linkages. Upon establishing linkages with people who seemed to latch on to the idea that after a handshake, a face-toface meeting or two, the email began to flow.

In the building of communication linkages, style and intent seemed to matter. The ability of facilitators to reflect warmth, interest, and exceptional listening skills and accurate recording skills appeared to be essential in the White River linkage with ARC from Vermillion. The challenge has been to determine if a new sense of community could be made between communities at more than convenient travel time (300 miles apart) and across cultures. Can people allow each other to expand their sense of community? If the regional efforts to expand community continue to be successful, then ARC members desire to tackle the challenge of linking with other communities in the nation and the world which have goals to design projects for rural community advancement. A basic premise for linking is in the phrase, "Together we shall overcome."

This White River experience of ARC members seemed to further underscore the importance of initial live contact and trust development to introduce the possibility of Web/technological resources for community development. In rural and tribal communities there must be a lot of listening, sharing, and genuine honesty to build a base for exchange. It also helped to have one of the ARC members to be an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Reservation and formerly a member of the White River community.

ARC members realized that people are most receptive to new ideas from people they know and trust already. In the Midwest, citizens learn from early childhood the importance of one's word and the significance of a handshake. It remains to be seen if a virtual rural community, with membership across the state or nation can be sustained in the White River area. First signs look very promising. It all seems to center on trust in a future vision which may assure individuals that the benefits of society can be within their reach. Participants need to understand the importance of their individual roles in contributing to the further growth of a better world.

**State and National Agendas**

In South Dakota, implementation of the Governor's plan to link all of the schools in the State has continually stimulated the climate for applications of information technology. Similarly, the National Presidential agenda to link the schools and to connect every home, including rural citizens to the Internet has served as an additional catalyst for rural discussions of future uses of technology.

ARC members have observed, however, that some rural citizens apparently feel so overwhelmed with so much emphasis on technology that there is a resolve to go slow and delay involvement in decision-making, rather than to "get with it." If dialogues with rural citizens are initiated with emphasis on the importance of keeping up with technological change, many citizens will withdraw from participation. Instead, meetings need to focus on citizen perspectives on the forces, which seem to be at work today. Many citizens, even those with some literacy in technology, seem to already have resigned themselves to being "out of touch" in making meaning of telecommunications.

**Summary**

Linkage of rural communities and setting goals for regional and broader communities is a major challenge. Contemporary technologies hold promise to help bring people together on common ground and to build new coalitions which have importance. But, the concept of a virtual community--relationships among people of shared values and goals--requires systematic human relations development through live face-to-face communication before electronic resources may be used.

The ARC members have their own data on the challenge of sustaining virtual relationships in its own members' efforts to work together, despite the distances of members living from South Dakota to Virginia and Maryland. It's about time zone differences resulting in two hours of communication down time for lunch hours--and other conflicts in the rhythms of the days. It's about sending back edits when there is risk that they may not be on target or wanted--and wondering whether by doing so a budding friendship may be unnecessarily tested. It's about long electronic silences without the gestures that signal listening. Did the email go through? Did they have time to read it? Did it have meaning for them? Did I offend them?

It's warm replies that encourage communication. But, when misunderstands do occur, it is as important to hear this bad news as the good. It takes courage to "shoot in the Internet dark" when children, families, and culture are at stake. It's all the challenges of complex communication with limited visual clues which caution ARC members to make current Internet applications with care. As more full-motion video becomes within the reach of most members of society, there will likely be more enthusiasm for communicating across traditional social barriers. To persist in building real or virtual communities, it takes commitment and it tests trust in love, but the rewards are in new friendships and projects with outcomes in economic and social progress.

A Center for Advancing Rural Communities, with an agenda to use electronic information resources, has been established in Vermillion, South Dakota, and leaders invite inquiries to link, to chat, and to plan how rural community linkages may expand educational, economic, social, and cultural opportunities across the world.

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| No to | Yes to |
|---|---|
| a. huge malls and mega cement parking lots | a. knowing the storekeeper |
| b. over choice and what's cool today | b. friends and family |
| c. frenetic management of the stock market | c. . peace and some pets |
| d. bigger engines and flashier stripes | d. a walk in the grass and trees |
| e. keeping up with the Jones's | e. a potluck with the Smiths |
| f. freeways and urban sprawl | f. care for the land and farms |
| g. getting Johnny into Harvard | g. quality education for all |
| h. competing to be in the know and dough | h. cooperating to learn and grow |
| i. thousands of animals in feedlots | i. concern for quality of life |
| j. dominance by corporate stock interests | j. power to the people |
| k. myself | k. together |

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